

Joining the Club: Reflections on Developing and Implementing a Social Work Doctoral Student Organization

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Abstract

This article describes the development of a social work doctoral student organization to enhance student experiences at a Midwestern school of social work. Doctoral student organizations are consistent with research that emphasizes the importance of environmental factors in doctoral program completion. Social supports are especially important among increasingly diverse social work doctoral students whose needs likely differ from those of their more homogenous predecessors. The authors describe the process of creating a student organization; identify the association's mission and activities; offer a reflective assessment, and provide recommendations for students interested in developing these organizations at their own institutions. We suggest that doctoral student organizations are feasible, affordable, and may enhance communication, mentoring, and the sense of community among doctoral social work students.

Keywords: doctoral students, doctoral program, attrition, retention, student diversity, doctoral program environment

Introduction

Over 2,428 social work doctoral students (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2012) are currently studying, researching, seeking employment, and (dare we suggest) *worrying*, across the more than 80 social work doctoral programs in the United States. To date, few studies have explored the experiences of social work doctoral students (Anastas & Kuerbis, 2009), although organizations have been developed to promote doctoral educational (e.g. Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education [GADE]). In the past decade it has become widely recognized that the doctoral education environment is important in doctoral student success (Gardner, 2008, 2010; Golde, 2005; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Sweitzer, 2009; Weidman & Stein, 2003). The Council of Graduate Schools (2008) identified the development of doctoral student organizations as a promising practice in fostering a supportive program environment. This article contributes to the literature on social work doctoral students by describing the development, implementation, and preliminary assessment of a doctoral social work association at a research-oriented university.

The Impact of Environment on Doctoral Student Success

Doctoral student success hinges on the student's integration into both the broader field of study and the student's local academic department (Tinto, 1993). This effective socialization of doctoral students leads to increased persistence. Important components of socialization include mentoring relationships with faculty and peers (Liechty et al., 2009; Lovitts, 2005; Sweitzer, 2009; Waldek, Orrego, Plax, & Kearney, 1997); an encouraging and cooperative, rather than competitive, climate (Weidman & Stein, 2003); the clear communication of expectations (Gardner, 2008); and guidance for navigating multiple transitions (Gardner, 2010).

Across substantive fields, doctoral program structures and processes reflect the experiences and characteristics of previous generations of doctoral students, who were typically young, white men (Gardner, 2008). However, among students admitted to doctoral social work programs in 2012, 73% were women, nearly 45% were from underrepresented groups, and 38.5% were age 35 or older (CSWE, 2012). Further, the majority of social work doctoral students are married and many are caring for dependents (Anastas & Kuerbis, 2009). Research with doctoral students in other disciplines suggests that this mismatch is particularly frustrating for students who are women, parents, students of color, older, or who attend part-time (Gardner, 2008) – common characteristics of social work doctoral students. Increasingly diverse cohorts of social work doctoral students, including international and first-generation students, are likely to feel marginalized when they encounter attitudes, structures, and expectations which are inconsistent with their identities and incompatible with their lives.

Further, socialization to doctoral study requires the elucidation of explicit and implicit rules, expectations, and supportive resources (Gardner & Holley, 2011). These important details, such as class schedules, assistantship workload, productivity expectations, service requirements, and subsequently, available resources and options for students who require greater flexibility, are not often addressed through formal university or departmental communications. Rather, these important norms are shared over time via interpersonal interactions with peers and mentors, when students are already in the midst of their doctoral pursuits. Therefore, creating an environment that facilitates effective communication, collaboration, and connection among students, their peers, and faculty, becomes essential for doctoral student success.

Graduate Student Organizations

At the undergraduate level, participation in student organizations has been widely studied and has been found to contribute to student success, including retention and completion (Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Tinto, 1993). Research suggests that doctoral students may also benefit from the social supports, networking opportunities, and professional development experiences student organizations typically provide (Gardner, 2005; Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Sweitzer, 2009). One study found that doctoral students valued the faculty and peer interactions they experienced via participation in a doctoral student organization (Gardner, 2005). Students use these opportunities to learn from more knowledgeable and experienced peers (Gardner, 2005) as well as to establish communication with faculty members who might serve as advisors or committee members (Gardner & Barnes, 2007). Moreover, students believed that the organizational connections and experiences they had via graduate organizations helped them in their job searches, as well as in their future positions (Gardner & Barnes, 2007). Graduate student organizations might further address doctoral students' needs by providing peer mentors who can answer questions students would rather not ask faculty (Gardner, 2010), as well as by providing opportunities to plan for and debrief from stressful national conferences and job interviews (Gardner & Barnes, 2007). Finally, doctoral student organizations can help ease the tensions over work-life balance likely faced by many doctoral students by incorporating families into the academic experience (Sweitzer, 2009).

Developing a Doctoral Social Work Association

Our Doctoral Social Work Association (DSWA) (henceforth we use “DSWA” to reference our particular organization, and “organizations” to describe all others) was created by doctoral students at a Midwestern School of Social Work for the purpose of increasing opportunities for communication, collaboration, mentorship, and professional development. Prior to the creation of DSWA, students informally offered these supports to one another on a small scale within their own social circles. Students recognized the benefits of a broader, more inclusive organization that would allow for more efficient and effective collaboration, advocacy, and leadership. The following sections describe our experiences implementing a doctoral student association and offer advice for doctoral students on enhancing their own programmatic environment via a doctoral student association.

During the early stages of development, one of the authors solicited student interest and opinions regarding the creation of a student-led organization and the official registration with the university. It seemed useful to form a Registered Student Organization (RSO), as the university provides space, resources, and funding for these organizations. The formal registration process required organizations to identify at least five officers, whose members would complete registration paperwork and participate in online financial and safety training.

Doctoral students interested in forming an organization established five officer positions and defined the duties and responsibilities assigned to each officer. The president schedules and facilitates meetings, serves as a liaison between doctoral students and the school’s administrators, and ensures compliance with university RSO requirements. The treasurer applies for and manages the organization’s funds. The social chairperson coordinates social events for doctoral students and their families. Two professional development chairpersons plan and implement seminars, brown bag lunches, and student opportunities to practice presentations.

Students emphasized that the five officers should reflect the diversity of the program. Students were encouraged to nominate peers and themselves for officer positions. As a result, the inaugural executive committee reflected the diversity of our students in terms of cohort, race, ethnicity, age, gender, and country of origin. The authors represent four of the five original DSWA student leaders (a fifth officer was unable to participate in writing the article). The creation of this organization was supported by students and by the school’s administration.

Key Components

The mission of our DSWA is to enhance doctoral students’ sense of belonging by facilitating communication, collaboration, mentoring, and professional development. Toward this end, our DSWA engages in four primary activities: monthly student meetings, professional development seminars, formal and informal mentoring, and social events. Monthly student meetings create connections between doctoral students and provide opportunities to share accomplishments and challenges related to graduate studies, to brainstorm strategies and solutions, and to identify needs that can be addressed by DSWA programming or by the School. On average, about half of the 25 doctoral students who reside locally attend these general meetings.

Professional development seminars, created in collaboration with program administrators, provide opportunities for students to explore research, teaching, scholarly writing and publishing,

funding, job market preparation, and stress management from experts within our department and across campus. In addition to these structured seminars, the DSWA provides doctoral students opportunities to practice job talks and conference presentations, and to receive feedback from peers and faculty members. On average, about 10 students (40%) attend these events.

Another major component includes two different types of mentoring: faculty and peer. With financial support from the School, we implemented a ‘Lunch with Faculty’ series. Monthly, two faculty members are invited to attend a catered lunch with doctoral students. These lunches are semi-structured: faculty members are asked to introduce themselves, describe their own academic journeys, and identify ways in which they are willing to collaborate with doctoral students. These relaxed lunches facilitate informal interaction between students and faculty, but also introduce students to potential committee members, writing collaborators, and mentors they might not otherwise meet through their courses or assistantships. These lunches are among our most well-attended activities, with an average of 18 students (75%) attending regularly.

In addition to promoting faculty mentoring, the DSWA provides formal and informal peer-to-peer mentoring. Incoming students can request a designated “peer mentor,” a more senior student to help navigate the first year of graduate studies. This type of mentoring often involves program-related advice, such as registering for classes and navigating departmental processes, as well as exploring a new community, and debriefing when overwhelmed. Informally, as communication between students has increased through DSWA participation, so has informal mentorship between students, who share successful grant proposals, paper ideas, dissertation completion strategies, and job announcements. Our DSWA’s Facebook page, accessible only to current and former doctoral students, provides a venue for celebrating achievements such as completing qualifying exams and publishing papers, as well as for sharing more personal news about non-academic interests and families.

Finally, our DSWA provides monthly social events for doctoral students and their families. These events, which have included bowling, potlucks, ice skating, and attending local festivals, occur outside the school and give students a chance to integrate their professional and personal lives. On average, approximately eight students attend these events.

Usefulness

In addition to implementing the association, our leadership team provided a reflective assessment of the usefulness of the DSWA. At the conclusion of the first year we assessed our association in two ways: informal observation and doctoral student feedback. The authors, all DSWA leaders, met as a group to discuss and to reflect on our experiences and observations implementing the DSWA. We reviewed the challenges we encountered, our perceptions of successes, and informal feedback we received from peers. Additionally, at the final DSWA meeting of the year, the leaders solicited direct feedback from the doctoral students about their experiences with DSWA. This meeting provided additional anecdotal data about student perceptions of the DSWA’s. The authors met again and used their notes from both meetings to identify four key themes. Although our assessment methods were informal and correlational, this reflection on our experiences may be useful for social work doctoral students in other programs. Further, it is important to note that these impacts mirror what could be observed by

DSWA leaders or was reported by students involved in DSWA and may not reflect the experiences of those who declined to participate.

Four major impacts were described by students and witnessed by those in leadership roles: reduced isolation, enhanced access to resources, increased student leadership opportunities, and improved school climate. Reduced isolation was perhaps the biggest impact: students developed collegial relationships that fostered mutual encouragement and support. Additionally, doctoral students reported having greater access to faculty who provided enhanced support and resources. Although all students are assigned formal faculty advisors, our events facilitated faculty mentoring of students with whom they might not share research or teaching interests, but who benefited nonetheless from faculty members' experience and wisdom.

Additionally, the DSWA was able to advocate for changes in school policies and practices by working collaboratively with each other and administrators. For example, doctoral students expressed interest in gaining teaching opportunities beyond traditional teaching assistantships. The DSWA worked with school administrators to develop and to distribute an annual "guest lecture list" of doctoral students willing to provide brief lectures on specific topics for classes throughout the year. Faculty members used this list to develop their course schedules, incorporating doctoral student guest lectures into their courses, as well as providing direct teaching feedback to doctoral students. Similarly, when students expressed anxiety about participating in the upcoming job market, DSWA leaders were able to arrange a meeting in which current members of the school's hiring committee met with students on the job market to provide advice for navigating the job search process.

A third impact included increased access to resources – primarily information-sharing among doctoral students. Students used the monthly meetings, email list, and social media pages to share grant and fellowship opportunities and interesting methodological articles. We also noted an increase in student collaboration on grant applications, conference abstracts, and article submissions. These opportunities provide students the chance to develop leadership skills and gain practice in collaborating with academic colleagues, experience which will be valuable in students' future roles as faculty members and researchers.

Finally, students and leaders highlighted an improved school climate for doctoral students. Students engaged more often in lunch and coffee outings, in informal conversations in the student lounge, and included students' partners and children in social activities (e.g. baby showers, dinners, holiday celebrations), even though many of these events were not formally sponsored or organized by the DSWA. Finally, our school routinely demonstrated support for and responsiveness to our DSWA, confirming its commitment to doctoral education and to the well-being of doctoral students. The creation of our DSWA provided multiple opportunities for doctoral students, program administrators, and faculty to work together to create changes which were mutually beneficial, and which, we hope, will bolster student productivity and persistence.

Lessons Learned

We found that developing and implementing our DSWA was feasible, affordable, and sustainable. However, we found that we did not benefit from completing the formal institutional

protocols for registering student organizations. Rather, as noted in the research, we found that university processes and resources for RSOs were primarily tailored to undergraduate students (Bair, Haworth, & Sandfort, 2004) and were not applicable for our doctoral organization. Consequently, the authors recommended that the DSWA not pursue renewal of its RSO status. Instead, we retained some of the structure required of registered student organizations, but have forgone the time consuming paperwork and training in favor of becoming an informal organization – recognized by our members and our department, but not by our university.

Further, the DSWA did not receive funding from the university or from any other source. We received in-kind donations of food and meeting space from our program, but these donations did not require the organization to maintain a bank account or financial records. As a result, we recommended eliminating the Treasurer position. We also recommended that both the President and Social Chairperson positions be shared by two students, as was already the case for the Professional Development position. We recognized that working in teams of two would lighten the workload and expand the size of our executive board to six persons, creating room for representation from additional cohorts and increasing the chances of sustainability by allowing an experienced chairperson to mentor a new chairperson.

The DSWA's lack of funding did not prevent our organization from planning and implementing meaningful events. However, several leaders reported feeling obligated to spend their own money on snacks, drinks, and other incidentals in an effort to extend hospitality at DSWA events. We encourage organizations to discuss members' expectations regarding food at events and to identify equitable ways (potlucks, snack schedules, donations, etc.) to meet those expectations. Undoubtedly, providing food may be the most meaningful and appreciated form of support a program, department, or school can give a doctoral student organization.

Finally, throughout the academic year, all of the 25 local doctoral students participated in at least one DSWA event or activity. Student participation was highest at events held over the lunch hour and at events attended by faculty. Conversely, fewer students attended social events held on weekends, although attendees were more likely to be international students and their families. Some students attended multiple events each month and participated with fervor. The majority of students attended multiple events each semester, whenever their schedules and workloads allowed. A few students participated only once or twice during the year. We advise organization leaders to expect significant variation in student participation, to recognize that subgroups of students may have different needs, and to accept that some students may not need or want to participate at all.

Conclusion

The pursuit of doctoral education, in any discipline, is a difficult undertaking – one completed by only half of all students who enroll in doctoral programs (Bair & Haworth, 2004; Golde, 2005; Liechty et al., 2009; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). Although little research examines the specific factors that influence attrition among social work doctoral students, developing a student-led doctoral organization may be a straightforward and inexpensive way to enhance supports for social work doctoral students and their families.

Student attendance at student-faculty lunches affirmed students' desire for close mentoring relationships with faculty (Lovitts, 2005; Sweitzer, 2009; Waldeck, Orrego, Plax, & Kearney, 1997). Similarly, students' willingness to lead and to participate in DSWA activities demonstrated their commitment to forming a more supportive, collegial, climate (Weidman & Stein, 2003): one that meets the needs of an increasingly diverse group of social work scholars (CSWE, 2012). The heightened sense of community which emerged from our efforts has been noted as particularly important, both by our doctoral students and by scholars of doctoral student success (Golde, 2005; Weidman & Stein, 2003). Finally, although our association's original mission focused on doctoral students' experiences, we found that our efforts also facilitated greater inclusion and incorporation of students' family members into our doctoral community. Given the increased diversity of doctoral social work students across the country (Anastas & Kuerbis, 2009; CSWE, 2012), who simultaneously pursue scholarship while caring for families, this outcome is particularly encouraging.

The creation and development of our DSWA has enhanced the environment of our doctoral program. Our student members indicate that our organization has generated a more collegial, collaborative environment in which students experience supportive relationships with faculty, with each other, and with family members. While we are not able to evaluate our association's impact on student persistence, our experience suggests that further study of doctoral social work organizations, including their proliferation across schools, their qualities, and their impact on student success, is certainly needed. In the meantime, we encourage social work doctoral students to pursue the creation of such organizations as low-cost ways to bolster doctoral student supports throughout the challenges of doctoral study.

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